

NATIONAL DEFENSE UNIVERSITY

NATIONAL WAR COLLEGE

**WAGING PEACE:  
THE CLAUSEWITZIAN DIMENSIONS OF  
PEACE ENFORCEMENT OPERATIONS**

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As a treatise on human behavior, Clausewitz' classic *On War* provides insights that we can apply to a variety of fields beyond the battlefield (e.g., policy, management, education). Without taking the master too far astray, the aim of this paper is to see what lessons we can draw from Clausewitz' theoretical framework pertaining to one of the most prominent and controversial uses of U.S. military force in the post-Cold War era, peace enforcement operations.

This paper argues that there is much we can understand about peace enforcement operations (PEO) from a Clausewitzian point of view. Not only does Clausewitz' analysis of war have much in common with this form of 'non-war,' but his approach also helps bring into focus the tensions between the political and military objectives of PEO. In particular, this offers us a new perspective on the problems of PEO termination planning and the military's unease in performing these missions.

The first section of the paper identifies numerous key points of commonality – as well as differences – between Clausewitz' perception of war and contemporary U.S. experience in PEO. Next is a discussion of some of the factors that will contribute to a continuing role for U.S. military forces in PEO for the foreseeable future. The paper then applies the framework of the Clausewitzian trinity (people/commander/state) to evaluate PEO, and concludes with key lessons for the strategist.

First, a note on terminology is in order. "Peace enforcement operations" (PEO) is used in this paper as it is defined in Defense Department doctrine: a subset of peace operations involving "the application of military force, or threat of its use, normally pursuant to international authorization, to compel compliance with resolutions or

sanctions designed to maintain or restore peace or order.”<sup>1</sup> Typically, PEO require that forces “aggressively take control of a contended area, stop any escalation of violence, enforce law and order, and impose an acceptable level of security and stability.”<sup>2</sup>

### **Clausewitz on PEO**

For purposes of planning and doctrine, the Defense Department groups PEO with a variety of other missions under the rubric “operations other than war.” This section tests the fit of Clausewitz’ theory of war to an activity *other than* war.

In important ways, PEO are not as antithetical to war in the classic sense as it may seem. A review of the definition and mandate of PEO presented above makes clear that these missions do indeed have much in common with the Clausewitzian view of war. Only a few minor word changes are needed to translate PEO into a Clausewitzian definition: *PEO* involve an act (*or threat*) of force to compel the *belligerents* to do the will of the *international community*.

Furthermore, Clausewitz’ principal observation of war is central also to PEO, specifically that both enterprises are but a continuation of policy (a point we will return to later in the paper). In addition, based on U.S. post-Cold War experience from Haiti to Somalia to Bosnia and beyond, Defense Department doctrine acknowledges that PEO “may have many of the same characteristics of war,” including “fear, physical strain, and uncertainty”<sup>3</sup> – a list quite similar to Clausewitz’ description of the climate of war. Because PEO are marked by intervals of violence, including the potential for precipitous escalation in the use of force, DoD guidance acknowledges that they are “planned and

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<sup>1</sup> Defense Department, *Joint Doctrine for Military Operations Other Than War*, Joint Pub 3-07 (Washington, D.C., Department of Defense, 1995), p. III-13.

<sup>2</sup> Max G. Manwaring and Kimbra L. Fishel, “Lessons That Should Have Been Learned: Toward a Theory of Engagement for ‘The Savage Wars of Peace’” in John T. Fishel, ed., “*The Savage Wars of Peace*”:

executed like any other combat operation.”<sup>4</sup>

Proportionality is another concept important to Clausewitz in war, and to U.S. doctrine in PEO. In addition, the unstructured and volatile situations common to PEO, combined with the multiplicity of coalition and NGO actors, political oversight, and media attention, give new dimension to Clausewitz’ concepts of fog and friction. Finally, Clausewitz’ notion of centers of gravity also has direct application to PEO, although instead of classical focal points like fielded forces or political leadership, PEO emphasize aspects such as buffer zones and public information.<sup>5</sup>

The preceding points clearly demonstrate that much of Clausewitz’ perspective on war applies to PEO. We must, however, also recognize important differences. For starters, the thought of using military forces to compel settlement of an internal dispute within another state represents a radical departure from the Westphalian system of state sovereignty that prevailed in Clausewitz’ time.<sup>6</sup> Also likely to sound paradoxical to the master are the notions, set forth in U.S. joint tactics, that in PEO “the enemy is the dispute,” and that “Although PEO may require combat, *they are not wars . . .*.”<sup>7</sup>

Finally, there are many in uniform whose recent PEO experiences have been seriously at odds with their training for war, and who have grave misgivings about this use of the military instrument. To buttress their view that PEO do not represent war,

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*Toward a New Paradigm of Peace Operations* (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1998), pp. 203-204.

<sup>3</sup> Defense Department, Joint Pub 3-07, pp. I-1, I-6.

<sup>4</sup> Defense Department, *Joint Tactics, Techniques, and Procedures for Peace Operations*, Joint Pub 3-07.3 (Washington, D.C., Department of Defense, 1999), p. III-17. Space does not permit a full elaboration here, but both this document and the doctrine publication cited above have a markedly Clausewitzian flavor throughout.

<sup>5</sup> Charles H. Swannack, Jr. and David R. Gray, “Peace Enforcement Operations,” *Military Review*, November-December 1997, pp. 4-6; Larry Wentz, ed., *Lessons from Bosnia: The IFOR Experience* (Washington, D.C., Institute for National Strategic Studies, 1997), pp. 167-187.

<sup>6</sup> As a counterpoint, Michael H. Hoffman depicts Prussia’s invasion of France in 1792 as an example of a PEO during the Clausewitzian period. See his article “War, Peace, and Interventional Armed Conflict: Solving the Peace Enforcer’s Paradox,” *Parameters*, Vol XXV, No. 4, Winter 1995-96, p. 41.

these folks point approvingly to passages in Clausewitz admonishing statesmen not to turn war “into something alien to its nature” (p. 88), and not to attempt “certain military moves and actions to produce effects that are foreign to their nature” (p. 608).

Before I pursue this problem further with the help of Clausewitz’ people/ commander/state trinity, let me explain why I believe PEO will continue to be a critical issue for U.S. military strategists in the years ahead.

### **The Role of PEO in Future U.S. Military Strategy**

For the foreseeable future there will be a continuing major role for U.S. military forces in PEO due to the combination – or more precisely the interaction – of key aspects of the international environment and elements of U.S. foreign and defense policy. These issues have been well rehearsed in the post-Cold War literature, and I shall cover them only briefly here.

In the international arena, we are continuing to witness powerful yet opposing forces of integration and fragmentation that will have a significant influence on the future global environment. Foremost among the integrative factors are increasing economic interpenetration and the revolution in information/communications technologies. Together these trends are shrinking the planet, shortening the news cycle, and increasing the degree and the pace at which developments a world away can affect our lives.

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<sup>7</sup> Defense Department, Joint Pub 3-07.3, p. x. Emphasis in original.

On the other hand, although some believe that the end of the Cold War also marked the end of ideology, it has been accompanied by the reemergence of one of the most powerful ‘ideologies’ known to man – nationalism. This has given rise to widespread fragmentation, through both renewed demands for self-determination by various groups and a recurrence of genocidal passions in response, in places as disparate as Rwanda, the former Yugoslavia, Indonesia, and Chechnya. Even as new states are trying to form along ethnic or cultural lines, the concept of sovereignty is becoming much more porous. States’ rights are being superseded by human rights. At the extreme end of the spectrum of fragmentation is the near total collapse of state authority such as we are seeing in Columbia and Russia.

A product both of the international environment and of the U.S. policy environment discussed below – and therefore perhaps a useful bridge between them – is the “unipolar moment.” U.S. sources of power and influence, both hard and soft, continue in the ascendant from what is already a position of unprecedented preponderance. Our Wilsonian idealism of World War I and the world leadership role we first assumed in the wake of World War II have now become imperatives of U.S. foreign and defense policy.

By exploiting the unipolar moment, the United States is dedicating its own substantial resources and trying to mobilize world opinion to respond to the adverse security consequences of the types of humanitarian catastrophes mentioned above, as well as to contain transnational breakdowns in the areas of terrorism, WMD proliferation, drugs, and organized crime. Hence our strategy of engagement.

This proactive posture, as well as the relatively modest reductions in our military

forces and CONUS infrastructure since the end of the Cold War, are in part explained by the powerful U.S. defense-industrial establishment and its friends in Congress. The political inertia preventing deeper cuts in U.S. defense has left us with military forces and capabilities too substantial not to be used as an instrument of activist engagement. This had led to a sense in our national security strategy that means are shaping ends.

For the near- to mid-term then, the international environment will continue to demand superpower leadership, and U.S. foreign and defense policies (and politics) will continue to supply that demand. In many cases, this is likely to continue to take the form of U.S. participation in PEO.

### **PEO and the Clausewitzian Trinity**

To this point I have highlighted points of commonality and difference between Clausewitz and PEO, and established the continuing relevance of PEO for the military strategist. This section attempts to gain further insight into this important yet controversial use of U.S. military force by relating PEO to the elements of Clausewitz' trinity – the people, the commander, and the state.

#### **The People**

Although the focus of this paper is on the U.S. role in PEO, it is worth noting that the intra-state conflicts that give rise to PEO are themselves well described by Clausewitz (and Jomini for that matter) as people's wars characterized by extremes of violence and passion. It is this environment of rabid enmity that explains the danger and high potential for violence facing PEO forces noted earlier.

In our democratic society, the support of an informed public is essential to a successful national military strategy. In recent years the U.S. (and global) public has

been bombarded with immediate and pervasive coverage of the humanitarian horrors of intra-state conflict by the revolution in information/communications mentioned previously. Combined with the increased influence of activist NGOs and ethnic-based interest groups, this information has been very effective in marshaling public support for U.S. involvement in PEO. Of course, this same phenomenon also brings us news of setbacks encountered by our PEO forces during deployment (e.g., the Mogadishu tragedy) that can just as quickly pull the plug on public support.

Even absent such reversals, the sheer duration and frequency of our involvement in PEO often tax public attention and support. In addition to this “compassion fatigue,” popular confusion over exactly what the U.S. role should be in an intra-state conflict half a world away also makes it difficult to gain and sustain public support. This sense of precarious support is commonly expressed in a demand by the people and their elected representatives for a time limit circumscribing our involvement in any given PEO.

The reassurance of a deadline can be helpful in consolidating public support, but unfortunately the people’s desire for a time limit has been confused in the public debate with the military’s need for an exit strategy. As I will try to show below, there is an important distinction between these two notions.

### The Commander

The military PEO commander operates in a volatile and potentially violent environment, yet at the same time must be responsive to sensitive political constraints. These factors (e.g., restrictive ROE) certainly add a new dimension to the Clausewitzian concept of the military genius as it applies to PEO. Along with courage, intellect, and restraint, another Clausewitzian facet that seems especially apt for the chaotic,

factionalized situation facing the PEO commander would be the ability to scan the locale and recognize not only its key physical and military features (*coup d'oeil*), but its social and political aspects as well.

Perhaps complaints by our military of “inner ear problems” (i.e., professional disorientation) associated with PEO suggest that it has yet to develop the type of genius necessary for this complex environment. This can be a serious impediment (vulnerability) to our effectiveness in PEO.

I noted earlier that U.S. military capabilities explain in part our willingness to intervene in these missions. Ironically, our interventions may be eroding that capability by depriving the military of the time and resources it requires to train in its core competency, with adverse consequences for force readiness, personnel retention, and morale. This contributes to professional dissonance and to the view described earlier that PEO are foreign to the nature of the military.

A key task for the PEO commander is that of translating political objectives into military objectives. PEO political objectives typically involve buying time in order to create ‘political space’ in which host nation institutions can gain or regain a footing of legitimacy in resolving internal conflicts without violence. Military objectives, such as separating and disarming the belligerents, creating a buffer zone, and resettling displaced parties, are necessary to achieve the political objectives. However, military tasks are usually not sufficient to accomplish the full scope of the political objectives; a key point to be reckoned with in developing PEO strategy is that other required tasks are more in the nature of institution-building, and are not likely to be achievable with military forces.

This brings us back to the exit strategy. Independent of the need for domestic

support for the mission, the astute commander requires a military strategy that identifies the desired end state to permit planning for the transition and redeployment of forces.

Developing an exit strategy is difficult, due to the problematic translation of political objectives to military objectives mentioned above, as well as to the interactive nature of the mission itself. Just as Clausewitz observed with regard to classic combat, so too with PEO: the very introduction of forces into the environment changes the entire dynamic of the situation. The interplay of the various actors and events, and the role of chance itself, will create continual change in the circumstances facing the commander, and will alter the way the forces must plan to achieve the end state objective.

### The State

In true Clausewitzian fashion, it is state policy that determines and directs involvement in PEO. The critically sensitive nature of PEO means that even routine matters at the tactical or operational levels can have strategic consequences. This helps explain why PEO are marked by such close oversight from senior policy levels. It also confirms Clausewitz' observation (p. 88) that the greater the conceptual distance between political objectives and military aims (a distance common in PEO, as discussed above), the more political the enterprise will be.

In a democracy we might expect that the issues identified by the people and the commander would converge at the level of state policy, and so they do. In the rational process of planning and authorizing PEO, the democratic state must in effect take into account both the people's political requirement for a deadline as well as the commander's military requirement for an exit strategy. How can the state balance these similar yet competing requirements? Now we confront the fog, friction, and chance of policy.

In the ideal situation, the chain of events would be something like this: (1) The state would have political objectives that (2) could be translated neatly into military objectives that (3) would permit the transition and redeployment of forces in an exit strategy that (4) was consistent with the deadline required by domestic politics. Now *this* is a scenario requiring genius and luck!

Based on U.S. experience in PEO over the last few years, what we are more likely to see instead are political objectives that (1) require a more or less open-ended time commitment, and (2) exceed what can be achieved through the use of the military instrument; complicated by (3) deadlines driven by domestic politics, and (4) exit strategies that try to blend political deadlines and conflict termination objectives.<sup>8</sup>

We are rarely able to fulfill completely the desired political objectives prior to the prescribed transition period/deadline. Unless great caution is exercised, the flow of events and the pressure to achieve political objectives may lure policy makers into directing the military to accomplish additional tasks outside their authority. This is the advent of mission creep.

### **Lessons for the Strategist**

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<sup>8</sup> Kevin C.M. Benson and Christopher B. Thrash, "Declaring Victory: Planning Exit Strategies for Peace Operations," *Parameters*, Vol XXVI, No 3, Autumn 1996, pp. 69-80.

This paper has shown that PEO, like war, are a combination of art and science, and fit pretty well into the Clausewitzian analytical framework. On the basis of this assessment, I would draw three main lessons.

- The aim of PEO is to buy time in order that host nation parties can create political space in which an enduring, stable, peaceful resolution of hostilities can take root.

However, domestic political support will demand putting a clock on these operations.

Further, although independently the military requires an exit strategy for conflict

termination planning, this is likely to be influenced by the domestic political deadlines.

As Clausewitz might say, neither the people nor the commander will want to take the first step into PEO without considering the last.

- The state must formulate political objectives as clearly as possible, but also recognize that these political objectives are likely to exceed what the associated military objectives are able to deliver. This raises the potential for confusion of means and ends, and can lead to mission creep, with adverse consequences for our strategy. We must also be alert to the possibility of a parallel problem in our national security strategy ('interest creep').

- Finally, the military's inner ear problem with respect to PEO can be attributed to the many post-Cold War uncertainties with which it is faced, including its concern over both mission creep and interest creep. Another contributing factor is its as-yet under-developed set of skills necessary to master this new and complex art. The military needs to broaden the dimensions of its genius, for instance by acquiring a socio-political *coup d'oeil* applicable to the far-flung theaters of future PEO.

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